

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 432 011

CS 013 671

AUTHOR DeFoe, Marguerite Corbitt
TITLE Using Directed Reading Thinking Activity Strategies To Teach Students Reading Comprehension Skills in Middle Grades Language Arts.
PUB DATE 1999-05-24
NOTE 47p.; Ed.D. Practicum, Nova Southeastern University.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Practicum Papers (043)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cooperative Learning; Decoding (Reading); *Instructional Effectiveness; *Language Arts; Metacognition; Middle School Students; Middle Schools; Parent Participation; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Improvement; *Reading Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Analogies; *Directed Reading Thinking Activities

ABSTRACT

This practicum was designed to use directed reading thinking activity strategies to teach reading comprehension skills to middle grades language arts students who frequently failed to make passing scores in reading comprehension exercises. The program included three specific strategies. The first strategy was to teach the students higher-order thinking and metacognitive skills by using SRA (Science Research Associates) activities, Directed Reading/Thinking Activities, and Question and Answer Relationship strategies. The second strategy was to teach the students decoding by analogy. The third strategy was to use cooperative learning while working on reading comprehension assignments. The goal and expectations were for all the students to improve reading comprehension so that students would make better grades. An analysis of the data revealed that students did improve their reading comprehension skills, but not significantly. Parent involvement was not what was expected. The lack of interest was due to tight schedules, and their perceived inability to help. Contains 31 references. (Author/RS)

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ED 432 011

Using Directed Reading Thinking Activity Strategies
To Teach Students Reading Comprehension Skills
In Middle Grades Language Arts

by
Marguerite Corbitt DeFoe
Cluster 87

A Practicum I Report Presented to
the Ed. D. Program in Child and Youth Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Nova Southeastern University
1998

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APPROVAL PAGE

This practicum took place as described.

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5/31/97

Date

This practicum report was submitted by Marguerite C. DeFoe under the direction of the advisor listed below. It was submitted to the Ed. D. Program in Child and Youth Studies and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

Approved:

5/24/99

Date of Final Approval of Report

Audrey Henry

Audrey Henry, Ed. D., Advisor

Abstract

Using Directed Reading Thinking Activity Strategies to Teach Students Reading Comprehension Skills in Middle Grades Language Arts. DeFoe, Marguerite C., 1998: Practicum Report, Nova Southeastern University, Ed. D. Program in Child and Youth Studies. Elementary and Middle School Students/Reading Comprehension Problems/Reading Comprehension Skills and Strategies/Parent Involvement.

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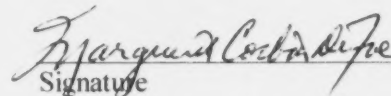
The program included three specific strategies. The first strategy was to teach the students a higher order thinking and metacognitive skills by using SRA activities, Directed Reading/Thinking Activities, and Question and Answer Relationship strategies. The second strategy was to teach the students decoding by analogy. The third strategy was to use cooperative learning while working on reading comprehension assignments. The goal and expectations were for all the students to improve reading comprehension so that students would make better grades.

An analysis of the data revealed that students did improve their reading comprehension skills, but not significantly. Parent involvement was not what was expected. The lack of interest was due to tight schedules, and their perceived inability to help.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank one teacher who was supportive of this project, and willingly "loaned" me her students. I owe a debt of gratitude to Mrs. Kirland, language arts teacher.

I would like to thank my principal, Mrs. Fletcher, for her support in making this project successful.

I would like to thank my husband, Roger DeFoe, for his unfailing support and encouragement when I needed it most, and my daughter, Adrienne DeFoe, for supporting me when I needed time to concentrate and produce the work.

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Audrey Henry, whose constructive feedback allowed me to complete this very challenging project.

Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Abstract.....	v
Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Description of Community.....	1
Writer's Work Setting.....	2
Writer's Role.....	5
Chapter II: Study of the Problem.....	6
Problem Statement.....	6
Problem Description.....	6
Problem Documentation.....	7
Causative Analysis.....	7
Relationship of the Problem to the Literature.....	9
Chapter III: Anticipated Outcomes and Evaluation Instruments.....	12
Goals and Expectations.....	12
Expected Outcomes.....	12
Measurement of Outcomes.....	13
Chapter IV: Solution Strategy.....	15
Discussion and Evaluation of Solutions.....	15
Description of Selected Solutions.....	24
Report of Action Taken.....	26
Chapter V: Results.....	32
Results.....	32
Discussion.....	34
Recommendations.....	37
Dissemination.....	37
References.....	38

Chapter I: Introduction

Description of Community

The practicum was implemented in a county which lies within the lower Atlantic Coastal Plain region of Southeastern United States. The terrain is generally flat to slightly undulating. According to the 1990 Census, about 62 percent of the county's land area is forested and the remaining 38 percent is either in cultivation or urbanized. Located in the central portion of southeast United States, this county encompasses some 618 square miles. The community which has a population of 33,000 is the county seat of this county.

The economy of the county is based principally on farm and forestry activities. The harvesting of pulpwood to supply the continued demand for paper mills in this community constitutes a substantial segment of the local economy. The county has increased its growth by 10 percent over the last five years with 16% of growth in industry and new businesses. The unemployment rate is estimated at six percent.

The five largest employers of this county have been the Walmart Distribution and Stores with 1400 employees, Gold Kist (agri-business) with 1300 employees, Board of Education with 930 employees, Fleetwood Homes (a manufacturer of house trailers) with 895, and Precision Cast Parts Corporation Airfoils (manufacturer of turbine components) with 800 employees. New industries have located in this county. They include Tecumseh which makes lawn mower motors, small engines, and carburetors and has a work force of 500 employees. Two cotton gins which employ 200 people process the cotton for the farmers. Three tobacco warehouses have been constructed for storage and auction of tobacco. They have a total of 100 employees. There have been several newly constructed

service buildings. They include the post office with 41 employees, the hospital with 550 employees, civic auditorium with 31 fulltime employees in addition to the 40 to 50 parttime employees, and the airport hangar with an extended runway has two employees. New retail businesses include a furniture store, an import car sales dealership, and a super discount store. There are three new banks, three new hotels, and one restaurant. This town has really grown in industry and retail.

There are ten public schools in the county consisting of one newly constructed highschool, two middle schools, and seven elementary schools. The total enrollment is 8,000 students from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. There are two private schools with a total enrollment of 600 students. This community offers post highschool education in a two year college which has an enrollment of 1044 and a vocational technical school with an enrollment of 300 students. It is estimated that 70 percent of the population have education ranging from highschool to graduate degrees.

Writer's Work Setting

The work setting is one of two middle schools. The mission of this school system is to provide a climate that will develop a community of life-long learners who are effective and happy citizens, and who are productive in a global society. The goals of this school system is to establish an effective school climate, improve academic achievement, improve school discipline, increase school and community involvement, and establish school and business partnerships.

This school was originally established in the early twenties and was formally an all black K-12 school. In 1969 it became a junior high school and in 1990 a middle school.

This middle school models the middle school concept like many middle schools in the state of Georgia. The middle school model is for students between the ages of 12-15 who are undergoing many changes - physical, social, emotional and mental.

The middle school recognizes these changes and provides a curriculum and a climate for students to move more easily from the elementary school to the high school. The subjects students learn are divided into two categories - basic academic subjects and exploratory subjects.

The basic academic subjects are language arts, mathematics, social studies and science. These subjects are taught by a team of teachers in a seventy minute academic block of time. The classes are taught all year long. Students are assigned to a team for the school year. The teachers know the students and their capabilities and provide learning activities to meet the needs of the students on the team.

Students take two exploratory subjects each six weeks. The exploratory subjects are agriculture, art, band, career connections, chorus, computer technology, foreign languages, health, home economics, keyboarding, and physical education. These exploratory subjects give students an introduction to subjects they may wish to take in high school, help students begin looking at careers, or assist students in developing life and learning skills. Students will explore foreign languages, vocational education, fine arts and personal learning skills. All middle school students must take a minimum of sixty hours of physical education and thirty hours of health each year as required by law.

The school is unique in that it has The Carver Center of Natural Sciences. This center is the only one in the state and consists of the geo-range with a volcano, amphi-

theater, recycling center, aqua habitat, sea floor scape, human sun-dial, archeological dig pit, the forest, butterfly garden, and the 21st solar-powered city. The faculty wrote a grant for this center and received monies for its development. It allows the teachers and students to use this center as an outdoor classroom for teaching Iowa Test of Basic Skills objectives that are mandated by this state. Also, this center is utilized to teach the Quality Core Curriculum objectives to the students. It is a vehicle for helping teachers make the teaching process more enjoyable by using hands-on experiences for the students to learn academics.

The work setting has 65 faculty members and three administrators. The levels of education for the faculty at this school are Bachelors Degree - 27, Masters Degree - 27, and Specialists Degree - 11. There is one Specialist's Degree teacher who is currently enrolled in Nova Southeastern University's Child and Youth Studies Doctoral program. The faculty is very progressive in using new techniques to enhance education.

The faculty is continually expanding their knowledge in their area of expertise in middle school. They take workshops, seminars, and college classes to expand their knowledge of their subjects, and they pass this knowledge on to the students in the process of teaching. The faculty visits middle schools to observe exemplary programs, with a view to learning new strategies which could benefit programs in their schools. The faculty serves a total of 640 students.

The writer's work setting is a middle school with an enrollment of 640 students. The students' ages range from ten to fifteen. The student population is made up 61% - Caucasian, 32% - Afro-American, 6.7% - Hispanic, and 0.3% - Asian. The students are

divided into six interdisciplinary teams each having one hundred students for instruction in language arts, mathematics, science/health and social studies. The students are offered a wide variety of exploratory subjects. These exploratory subjects consist of agriculture, art, band, career connections, chorus, computer technology, drama, French, Latin, Spanish, health, home economics, keyboarding, and physical education. The students are from diverse backgrounds and some have rich cultural experiences while others have had very little.

Writer's Role

The writer's role will be to conduct the entire practicum without any assistance from anyone. The writer has a Specialist Degree in middle school and has taught language arts and reading for fifteen years. In this middle school, the writer teaches Latin, health, and drama to sixth through eighth grade students. The writer's role and responsibilities will be to conduct the entire practicum in a sixth grade language arts class. The writer will use the strategies that were suggested by research for improving inferential comprehension skills of the students. These skills will meet the county and state requirements for the curriculum. The writer will be responsible for teaching eighteen sixth graders ranging in age from twelve to thirteen.

Chapter II: Study of the Problem

Problem Statement

The problem to be solved in this practicum was that sixth grade language arts students had difficulty answering inferential comprehension questions. Most students should have been performing at grade-level in reading comprehension, but many were not demonstrating satisfactory total reading scores, based on Iowa Test of Basic Skills, (ITBS).

Problem Description

The problem statement as it existed in this sixth grade language arts class was that students experienced difficulty and demonstrated low achievement when answering inferential comprehension questions in their assignments. The students showed low or failing grades in comprehension assignments given by the teacher. The writer assessed the students' grades in the teacher's record book and found that 11 out of 18 students had failing grades in inferential comprehension. Based on results of ITBS testing, many students received grades which were less than satisfactory in vocabulary and reading comprehension. Students should have been able to demonstrate mastery of vocabulary and reading comprehension in the prescribed reading program.

There were a number of causes leading to this problem. Students limited experience in reading led to poor reading skills. Many students came from single parent low-income homes where there were no resources for students to read and gain experience and fewer opportunities to gain world experiences. Another cause was due to inconsistencies in instruction in whole language. Skills which were important for students

to acquire were not addressed. A final cause is that students who were ill prepared were passed from one grade to the next, and as a result did not acquire the necessary skills.

Problem Documentation

Anecdotal records indicated that students demonstrated a high level of frustration when answering inferential comprehension questions in class assignments. Data from the teacher's grade book indicated that students received grades below 70% on inferential reading assignments. In addition, data from sixth grade cumulative files for reading indicated that 11 out of 18 of the students had failing grades or low 70s. The students's average on the ITBS reading total scores was 38. A comparison of the reading percentile scores of the language arts students with the national scores found that students' scores were 12% below the average of the state.

Causative Analysis

The first cause of this problem was that students had poor reading skills. Data in students' cumulative records revealed that in previous years 11 students were failing in their reading classes. Examination of these records, found that two of the eighteen students were being served by Chapter 1, two were served by a speech therapist in their primary years, and four of the eighteen students had been retained because of failing reading grades. Results of this investigation indicated that the students' reading scores were not on grade level, and students had a history of social promotion.

The second cause of this problem was that students came from single parent low-income homes which have fewer resources for students to read and gain experience during their formative years. Based on an interview with an instructional coordinator from one of

the elementary feeder schools in this area, it was found that this school's population had a large percentage of students who came from single parent low-income homes. Further information from this interview revealed that "there was a tremendous correlation between socio-economic level and academic achievement". Examination of the students' cumulative folders revealed that 11 out of 18 students came from this particular feeder school. Data in the cumulative records indicated that eight of the eleven students had failed or made very poor grades in reading in earlier grades. This group of students will be known as group number one in this practicum. The other seven students involved with the practicum who have poor grades but are passing with low 70's will be known as group number two. Records also revealed that the students have a history of below grade performance in reading. In addition, erroneous perception of whole language led to the teachers neglecting to teach the necessary skills that the students needed.

The third cause of this problem was the inconsistencies in instruction in whole language. Skills which were important for students to acquire were not addressed. The interviews with the instructional coordinators of the three feeder schools for this middle school indicated that teachers had erroneous beliefs about the whole language concept. Further questioning of the coordinators disclosed that the teachers did not have guidelines for teaching the required reading comprehension skills while using this program. Because of the results of the investigation, the writer was led to conclude that ineffective teaching methods created students' poor reading comprehension skills.

Relationship of the Problem to the Literature

The scope of the research was limited by searching for information only in the elementary and middle school grade levels. The writer researched the following topics for the literature review: middle school reading comprehension, inferential comprehension, reading skills, parent involvement in education, students' reading abilities, improving reading skills, teenage pregnancy and its effects on reading achievement, directed reading thinking activities, question answer relationship technique, flexible grouping, cooperative learning, scaffolded reading, reciprocal teaching, and imagery training.

A number of researchers found that middle school students had low test scores on standardized tests and tests given by teachers. Morrill (1995) wanted to improve below grade level reading comprehension in seventh graders, and she reported that problems of low reading comprehension were documented by the Illinois Goals Assessment Program, district files, and by teachers. In this study, Morrill found that 60% of students' scored below their counterparts within the school, the district, and the state. In Morrill's report, teacher-selected assessment revealed that 20 out of 29 students had comprehension scores of 56.5% which was below average. Morrill began implementing strategies that promoted higher order thinking and metacognitive skills which resulted in an improvement of reading comprehension skills.

Almanza (1997) conducted an eight week study of 53 sixth graders from two classes in Brooklyn, New York who had reading comprehension problems. She found that the sixth graders needed improvement in reading comprehension. She began implementing strategies to improve reading comprehension.

Ellis (1996) conducted a twelve week study on the impact of parent involvement on second and third grade students' reading ability. Ellis wanted to improve the students' poor reading ability. The students were approximately six months below grade level in reading.

The literature review indicated several causes for poor reading comprehension. The first cause of poor inferential comprehension skills was curricular deficiencies. Morrill's (1995) study revealed that curricular deficiencies and the lack of critical thinking skills contributed to this problem. Morrill investigated why the students had curricular deficiencies and found that ineffective teaching strategies were being implemented. Russell (1997) suggested that junior high schools were antique and that they did not consider the adolescent's physical, emotional, and social changes at this age. Russell investigated why students had poor academic achievement in reading comprehension. He began implementing strategies to improve reading comprehension.

The second cause of poor inferential comprehension skills was home environment. Benjamin's (1993) report indicated that the lack of mothers' educational backgrounds influenced the comprehension of their children in school. The 1990 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that mothers without highschool education affected their fourth grade children's academic abilities. It was found that the fourth grade children scored lower than children with parents who completed highschool. A mother's educational level had a direct influence on a child's reading skills and achievement in academics.

Nathan (1996) conducted a study to determine whether parents who were not

involved in their child's education had a negative effect on the child's reading comprehension. Nathan advocated that educators and employers should be flexible when scheduling meetings, activities, and conferences with parents. He discussed a program, The Employer's Promise, which allowed parents to have flexible schedules at their work place so that parents could be more involved with their children's education.

The third cause of poor inferential comprehension skills was students' lack of reading comprehension strategies. Gaskins, Gaskins, Anderson, & Schomer (1995) stated that students' lack of decoding skills caused the problem of reading comprehension. Students in this study did not have the ability to decode unknown words. They used selected cues for learning words, but these cues did not work for them. This inability to decode kept these students below their reading level in school. This study stated that students had poor spelling, vocabulary, and comprehension skills.

Thompson's (1993) article stated that problems in comprehension could be a result of lack of instruction in reading strategies. He stated that students who had adequate support from teachers and who practiced reading skills would be able to incorporate what they have learned to real world problems. Thompson suggested specific techniques that teachers could model to help students improve reading comprehension skills.

Chapter III: Anticipated Outcomes and Evaluation Instruments

Goals and Expectations

The goal of this practicum was that sixth grade language arts students would achieve the skill to answer inferential comprehension questions successfully. The expectation was that students will use these skills to advance from concrete operational thinking to abstract operational thinking.

Expected Outcomes

The following outcomes were projected for this practicum:

1. At least 15 out of 18 of the language arts students in this study will improve inferential reading comprehension skills by obtaining 70% accuracy on assignments. The instruments of evaluation were teacher made tests, the scores from which were stored in the cumulative folder. The teacher will set the standard of performance at 70% for all assignments given to the students on inferential comprehension.

2. At least 15 out of 18 parents will participate in helping students with their reading assignments at home. Parents will return a signed contract to the school once a week for the 12 week practicum. The writer will send home a contract for parents which outlines the students' assignments for each week. A record of returned contracts will be kept by the teacher. The standard of performance will be that 15 out of 18 parents will help their child with reading assignments.

3. From group one, at least eight out of 11 students will improve their inferential comprehension scores from failing grades of below 70 to 70 or above as measured by Science Research Associates (SRA) comprehension test, after 12 weeks of instruction.

The instrument of evaluation will be a pre and post test administered at the beginning and at the end of the practicum. The standard of performance will be that eight out of 11 students will score 70 or above on comprehension.

4. From group two, at least five out of seven students will improve their inferential comprehension scores from a grade of low 70 to 80 or above after 12 weeks of instruction, as measured by an SRA test. The instrument of evaluation will be a pretest and a post test administered at the beginning and end of the practicum. The standard of performance will be that five out of seven students will score 80 or above on comprehension skills.

Measurement of Outcomes

Outcome number one stated that 15 out of 18 students will improve inferential comprehension skills by obtaining 70% accuracy on assignments after 12 weeks. The writer used the cumulative record submitted by the teacher to determine whether students obtained 70% accuracy on assignments. The information was gleaned from a daily record kept by the teacher during 12 weeks of instruction. Outcome number one will be successful if 15 out of 18 students improve their scores to 70% or better on comprehension assignments.

Outcome number two stated that 15 out of 18 parents will participate in helping their students with reading assignments at home, and will return a signed contract to school once a week. Participation of parents will be measured by the number of returned contracts. The weekly record of returned contracts will be kept by the teacher during the 12 week practicum. Outcome number two will be successful if 15 out of 18 parents helped

students with reading assignments and return the signed contracts once a week.

Outcome number three stated that eight out of 11 students from group one will improve their inferential comprehension scores from failing grades of below 70 to 70 or above as measured by SRA comprehension test, after 12 weeks of instruction. The writer used the SRA pretest and posttest record score sheet to keep records of students' pre- and posttest scores, and raw scores were converted to percentage scores. Students' individual scores were transferred to a cumulative score sheet at the end of the 12 weeks. The outcome will be achieved if eight out of 11 students score 70 or above on SRA tests after 12 weeks of instruction.

Outcome number four stated that five out of seven students from group two will improve their inferential comprehension scores from a grade of below 70 to 80 or above as measured by SRA comprehension test after 12 weeks of instruction. The writer used the SRA pretest and posttest record score sheet to keep records of students' pre- and posttest scores, and raw scores were converted to percentage scores. The outcome will be met if students' scores are 80 or above. Students' individual scores will be transferred to a cumulative score sheet at the end of the 12 weeks.

Chapter IV: Solution Strategy

Discussion and Evaluation of Solutions

The topics reviewed for the literature review included: middle school reading comprehension, inferential comprehension, reading skills, parent involvement in education, students' reading abilities, improving reading skills, teenage pregnancy and its effects on reading achievement, strategies for improving reading comprehension, comprehension, reading motivation, and inferential comprehension.

The problem addressed in this practicum was that sixth grade language arts students had difficulty answering inferential comprehension questions. This inability of middle school students to comprehend on a higher level can be related to slow maturation and students inability to think abstractly.

A number of solutions have been gleaned from the literature. Research indicated that a variety of metacognitive strategies (Morrill, 1995; Dashner, 1995; Fasko, 1996; Gaskins, Gaskins, Anderson, & Schommer, 1995), imagery (Bourdin, Bourdin, & Manley, 1994), question generation (Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996; Garcia & Pearson, 1990), and question and answer (Cerra, Watts-Taffe, & Rose, 1997), can be used to improve reading comprehension skills in low-average to high-ability students. A variety of metacognitive strategies would work with this sixth grade reading class to improve reading comprehension skills, because students at this age need prompts or clues to spur their thinking process. The writer incorporated these strategies for instruction of comprehension skills in this practicum.

A strategy to improve reading comprehension was the use of higher order thinking

and metacognitive skills (Morrill, 1995). Morrill used these strategies with her seventh grade students in her language arts class. She used purpose setting within the questioning phase of reciprocal teaching. The reciprocal teaching included questioning, summarizing, clarifying, and predicting. Students engaged in comprehension activities that focused on higher order thinking skills following the reading of the material. As a result, the students reading comprehension skills improved.

The literature indicated that children were lacking in literacy experiences due to environmental factors (Dashner, 1995). Dashner conducted a study to improve reading readiness in kindergarten students. Strategies that were used were a parent involvement program, increased writing activities, and cross-age reading with sixth grade students. The findings indicated an improvement in reading skill due to increased reading experiences for the students. If all teachers went to these lengths for children of this age, there would be a lower percentage of students with poor reading comprehension skills.

Armstrong and Waszak (1992) stated that 80% of teenage mothers-to-be drop out of school to have their babies and 44% never graduate from highschool and this in turn created a low-income uneducated mother and a child lacking in reading experiences. The writer incorporated a parent involvement strategy to help improve the students' attitude to reading which in turn will improve comprehension skills.

Fasko's (1996) study looked at another possible solution. This study "assessed peer tutoring to determine whether any progress in this area resulted in improvement in reading fluency" (p. 1). Strategies that influenced the students' improvement in reading were the directed reading thinking activities, question answer relationship technique,

flexible grouping, cooperative learning, scaffolded reading, reciprocal teaching, and imagery training. The writer used directed reading thinking activities, question answer relationship, cooperative learning, and imagery training in the classroom to improve the students' comprehension.

Another strategy used to improve reading comprehension was a word identification program developed by Gaskins, Gaskins, Anderson, & Schommer (1995). Gaskins et al., found that students with reading comprehension difficulty were identified by the staff's action research team. Gaskins et al. conducted a five year study for poor readers in grades one through eight, and developed a word identification program. Gaskins et al. found that the word identification program enabled students to become better readers and allowed them to improve their comprehension. The writer will not focus on word identification because of time constraints.

Another strategy, one that involved the use of imagery, was recommended by (Bourdin, Bourdin, & Manley, 1994). Bourdin's, et al., study used imagery as a tool to improve reading comprehension of children in the upper elementary grades. The use of imagery helped the students who had difficulty making logical inferences in reading. It allowed them to experience the story by reading the words, visualizing, and then discussing the story. The imagery training for the student with reading deficiencies allowed them to experience all modalities of learning to comprehend the story. The student's reading comprehension skills were greatly improved. This writer used imagery to help students improve their skills in understanding text.

Additionally, research indicated that question generation was used to improve

reading comprehension. Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman (1996) reviewed studies which found that question generation was used to improve students' comprehension. The students used this cognitive strategy before, during, and after their reading. This gave the students a focus, helped them to comprehend what they read, and trained them to become critical thinkers. Garcia & Pearson's (1990) report stated that instructional approaches used to teach students comprehension should include question generation to develop higher level cognitive strategies. The students were taught question generation by the writer to help improve critical thinking skills.

Cerra, Watts-Taffe, & Rose's (1997) article supported Rosenshine et al., review studies. Cerra, et al., suggested that deaf and hard of hearing students improved reading comprehension using question and answer strategies. The teacher trained the student to ask questions before the material was read. The students internalized the strategy of asking and answering questions, and improved their comprehension skills. As an introductory activity, the writer used the question and answer strategies to generate the interest of the students.

Another technique to improving students' comprehension was the scaffolded reading approach. Rothenberg and Watts (1997) combined a scaffolded reading approach with an interdisciplinary unit which helped eighth and ninth grade students with learning difficulties in reading. Rothenberg and Watts found that students could not read by themselves and understand the reading material. They engaged in pre-reading, during-reading, and post reading activities while teaching their students Macbeth. This approach would not work in the writer's setting because the staff does not teach interdisciplinary

units. Students needed to focus on specific skills to improve reading comprehension. The writer did not implement this approach in this practicum because it would not meet the instructional needs of the students in this setting.

Another strategy for improving reading comprehension was cooperative learning. Almanza (1997) conducted a study with sixth graders comparing cooperative learning strategy in small groups with whole classroom instruction using Directed Reading Thinking Activities. Almanza found that cooperative learning was more effective for improving reading comprehension than whole classroom instruction using Directed Reading Thinking Activities. Cooperative grouping strategies would work in this practicum setting because earlier observations in the classroom indicated that these students like working together while completing their assignments. The writer incorporated cooperative grouping strategies during this practicum when the students were working on critical thinking skills.

Research indicated that Directed Reading Thinking Activities (Sears, Carpenter, & Burstein, 1994; Tancock, 1994), including strategies such as scaffolding or procedural prompting (Rosenshine et al., 1996), and classroom discussion led by the teacher (Kucan, & Beck, 1997), improved students' reading comprehension.

Directed Reading Thinking Activities was used as another strategy for improving reading comprehension. Sears, Carpenter, & Burstein (1994) developed a six week reading program to improve comprehension of their learning disabled eighth graders in language arts. The teachers used DRTA in the classroom. Teachers modeled reading aloud, paired students with a partner for reading, and created meaningful reading

instruction by using summarizing, questioning, predicting, and clarifying to improve vocabulary. The students showed a measurable gain on word recognition and reading comprehension questions. The writer incorporated DRTA in the classroom because students enjoyed the challenge of using different strategies.

Tancock (1994) supported the program recommended by Sears et al., (1994). She developed a lesson for low-achieving children with reading problems in an after school tutoring program. Her lesson consisted of Directed Reading Thinking Activities. The lesson included prereading activities such as generating questions making predictions. Students answered questions that were generated during prereading activities. Post reading activities included evaluating predictions, clarifying, and extending or refining thinking about the story. The students progress was assessed by reviewing items in the literacy portfolios. There was significant improvement in the students' reading skills. The students began viewing the reading process as a meaningful experience rather than just rapidly going through reading material to get specific answers to assignments.

Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman (1996) supported Tancock and Sears' programs. They stated that the use of scaffolding helped students learn a difficult skill and the scaffolding was slowly removed as the student understood the skill. An example of this would be a teacher generated model which students used as a study guide for assignments. Rosenshine, et al., stated there was another type of scaffold called the procedural prompt. Procedural prompts can cue the student with strategies to use as they complete exercises. Rosenshine stated there were five types of prompting that could be used. These included "signal words, generic question stems and generic questions, the main idea of a passage,

question types, and story grammar categories" (1996, p.185). In the review of studies, Rosenshine et al. found that scaffolding and prompting were strategies that helped students to improve comprehension skills. The writer used these strategies to guide the students to successful academic achievement in reading comprehension.

Another strategy for improving reading comprehension is reciprocal teaching. Kucan and Beck (1997) stated that reciprocal teaching strategy improved reading comprehension skills. Reciprocal teaching is a collaboration between teachers and students about literary materials that include strategies such as questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting about the text. Students assumed the role of the teacher and led the discussion. The advantages of this strategy were that the students had a deeper meaning of the text after they progressed through the steps of reciprocal teaching.

Research indicated that parents involved in their children's education improved reading comprehension ability. Williams (1997), Benjamin (1993), Nathan (1996), Epstein (1995), Ellis (1996), Davies, Burch, & Johnson (1992), and Swick (1992) found that involving parents in the teaching of reading comprehension improved the students' performance in inferential comprehension. The writer of this practicum involved parents by having them listen to their children read a story at home twice a week and sign a contract that stated they had done this.

Williams (1997) conducted two, two-hour workshops to educate parents about standards that were part of the middle school system and informed them how their entering sixth grade children could reach them. She was successful in getting a number of parents to volunteer to help with the workshops. This effort resulted in parents getting

involved with their child's educational process and led to improvement in students' academic achievement.

Benjamin (1993) supported Williams' study. She reported that the literacy skills have a direct effect on the children's academic achievement in school. She stated that intervention programs designed for the family would increase the reading comprehension skills of the students. These intervention programs benefitted both the students and the parents. Benjamin indicated that students and parents were able to generate definitions for the vocabulary.

There was an abundance of research on parents' involvement with their children's education. All research concluded that students' academic achievement improved. Nathan's (1996) research reported on several studies which indicated that greater involvement of parents in their child's education resulted in greater academic achievement of the students. Epstein's (1995) also found that teacher-parent partnerships fostered academic growth for students.

Davies, Burch, & Johnson (1992) supported Nathan and Epstein's research. They stated that urban elementary schools used the traditional strategies of getting their parents involved. These authors suggested that some of these strategies could be open house, club meetings, fall festivals, parent-teacher conference days, class mothers, and parent teachers organizations. According to the authors, these have all resulted in academic improvement.

Swick (1992) supported Davies et al., and recommended that parents and teachers share partnership in their children's education because they are committed to achieving similar goals. According to Swick, the combined effort encourages students'

learning.

Another strategy to improve reading comprehension was inclusion. Marottoli-Heyman (1995) discussed how inclusion increased students' reading comprehension skills. She gave specific steps to implement an inclusive program. These steps included "administering an informal assessment to the students, developing reading groups, creating multisensory activities, creating isolated comprehension skills, and forming lesson outlines" (Marottoli-Heyman, p. 39). An inclusive reading program in my setting would enable the writer to work one on one with students who needed individualized instruction in reading comprehension skills, but the writer did not have the power base to do this in this setting.

Additionally, a strategy for improving reading comprehension was the use of flashcards. Tan and Nicholson (1997) stated that the use of flashcards to train students to read words faster, improved students' comprehension of text. The authors trained students with poor reading ability. They found that if a student learned how to read fluently without worrying about the pronunciation of the words the comprehension improved. Using flashcards would work in my setting, but the schedule would not allow enough practice time for the students for all strategies to be implemented. Additionally, the writer's focus was on comprehension skills, not word recognition.

Saplala (1995) discussed other reading techniques such as skimming, scanning, speed reading, and study skills to improve students' reading comprehension skills. Saplala defined skimming as taking a quick look at the material and getting a general idea, and scanning as locating specific information in reading material. Speed reading was defined as

reading fast without sacrificing comprehension. These reading techniques would work in this setting because students have weaknesses in these skills. The writer implemented skimming and scanning reading techniques in the practicum during Directed Reading Thinking Activities.

Parker's (1997) Science Research Associates (SRA) Reading Laboratory was an instructional program with ten levels of comprehension power builders to be used by students to improve reading comprehension skills. The writer utilized this laboratory of skill cards to teach the students reading comprehension skills.

Description of Selected Solutions

The writer utilized Parker's (1997) Science Research Associates (SRA) Reading Laboratory, as one of the primary resources for instruction for the class of 18 sixth grade language arts students. The SRA Lab was used by the students to improve metacognitive skills such as: cause/effect, sequence, problem/solution, main idea, story elements, setting/mood, comparison/contrast, and purpose/conclusion. Students were expected to move through this lab independently after the teacher trained them.

The teacher used the SRA Reading Laboratory, to strengthen students' reading comprehension skills. This instructional program had fifteen cards in one level, and the students had to complete six to ten of the fifteen cards successfully before going on to the next level. The teacher conferenced with the students after the sixth to tenth power builder was completed, to assess their progress and their readiness to move on to a higher level.

The writer used Rosenbaum's (1984) The Spotlight on Reading: Critical Reading, Inference, and Tucker's (1984) Sequence as the other resources for instruction for the

class of language arts students. The teacher implemented Directed Reading Thinking Activities with these books to improve students' reading comprehension skills. In addition, the teacher created cooperative groups using the exercises in the Spotlight on Reading books.

The skills that the students practiced in the Critical Reading textbooks were: differentiating between fact and opinion and reality and fantasy; understanding the writer's point of view; understanding the purpose of a piece of writing; recognizing the persuasive methods in advertisements; recognizing false generalizations; completing analogies; identifying facts that support an opinion; analyzing and distinguishing between different points of view; analyzing primary source material; analyzing a selection to determine whether critical information was missing in order to solve a problem; determining the difference between facts and educated guesses; determining whether facts support a generalization; and analyzing an author's or writer's qualification or source of information.

The skills that the students practiced in the Inference textbooks were as follows: picture interpretation, interpreting figures of speech, inferring sentence meaning, predicting outcomes, drawing conclusions, and interpreting the mood of a story or poem.

The Sequence textbooks focused on sequencing, alphabetical order in dictionaries and reference books, putting directions in order, using time clue words, and putting numbers and dates in order.

The writer assigned readings from the adopted textbook, Probst's (1997) Elements of Literature and used these for read aloud sessions. The teacher sent home

readings for the students to share with their parents during the 12 week practicum. The parents listened to the students read two stories each week, signed the contract, and students returned this contract every Friday during the twelve week practicum.

Report of Action Taken

The writer discussed all phases of the practicum implementation process with the school principal, after which the principal gave the writer verbal permission to proceed with the implementation process. The writer received permission from the sixth grade language arts teacher to do the implementation in her classroom.

The writer sent parent permission forms home to the students' parents prior to the implementation. All parents returned the permission forms by their children before the implementation began.

An action plan for the 12-week practicum was designed to help the writer, teacher, and students achieve the goal of improving reading comprehension. The teacher administered the SRA pretest to determine the beginning reading level of each student. She assessed the students' pretest and directed them to the correct level in the SRA Laboratory. The students were trained how to use the SRA Laboratory so that they would move independently through this lab. The teacher acted as the facilitator when students used the SRA Laboratory. She used cooperative learning, and Directed Reading Thinking Activities, while working with the Spotlight on Reading text. The teacher administered a posttest as a final assessment to determine gains in comprehension skills.

During the first week of the implementation process, the teacher introduced the SRA Laboratory and trained the students to use it. Students worked in the SRA Lab

weekly. The students were taught the method of Surveying-Questioning-and Reading before they began working independently in the SRA Lab. They were given portfolios with their beginning SRA reading levels. The portfolios were used to keep all students' work. For homework, students were given a contract which included a list of readings to be shared with parents. The students would return the contract signed by the parent stating that they listened to their child read. The students did this for the 12 week practicum. The teacher kept a record of the contracts that were returned and signed during the 12 week practicum.

The teacher taught D.R.T.A. and imagery using the first two lessons in Spotlight on Reading: Inference textbooks. The students defined inferencing and were able to draw logical conclusions from what the writer had written. Throughout this week, the writer found the behavior of the students very trying. Inappropriate behavior included oral remarks that had nothing to do with the lesson, inappropriate laughter, and tardiness in attending to the task at hand.

Because of the low reading ability of the students, the writer made all assignments in Spotlight on Reading oral. The students were not very cooperative because they knew their reading ability was not on level as it should be. The writer became their reading coach as they read in class. There were students who did not read at first, but eventually felt comfortable and read orally in class after much practice. The students were learning how to read as well as learning inferencing skills.

During the second week, the teacher modeled cause and effect before students worked independently with the SRA Laboratory. The teacher utilized D.R.T.A. and

question generation strategies with Spotlight on Reading textbook. The teacher used signal words and generic question stems to teach inference skills. Using lessons three, four and five from the textbook Spotlight on Reading: Inference the student made logical inferences about information that was not directly stated. The students interpreted the actions and motivations of characters in a story and identified cause and effect relationship in a written passage.

During this week, the students went from being off-task to becoming very excited about learning the skills. They jumped at answering questions and participated very readily in completing exercises in the inference book.

During the third week, the teacher taught sequencing through a scaffolded activity. The teacher taught the strategy of imagery in lessons six, seven, and eight in the Spotlight on Reading: Inference textbook. The students inferred information given on a diagram to solve mathematical problems, and they inferred the intended meaning of a cartoonists, based on the evidence in the cartoon. They inferred the cause or the effect of a character's action in a story.

There were some teachable moments in lessons six, seven, and eight in the Spotlight on Reading Inference textbook. The writer planned to teach inference skills to the students, but the students had so much interest in the lesson it branched off into measurements in math, safety in the water, and planning a future career. Rosenbaum's (1984) Spotlight on Reading Inference book had interesting subjects for the students to read and write about while they were learning inferencing skills. The writer went into

depth teaching each of the subjects, and the students learned new information and enjoyed the discussions while they learned inference skills.

During the fourth week, the teacher modeled purpose/conclusion. The teacher modeled how to draw conclusions in lessons nine and ten of the Spotlight on Reading: Inference textbook. The students drew conclusions from details in a written passage and from evidence given by the writer in a story.

During the fifth week of the implementation process, the teacher modeled how to identify problem/solution. The teacher conducted a question and answer activity in lessons eleven and twelve in the Spotlight on Reading: Inference textbook. The students inferred the location of library books or reference materials by the title of the book and inferred the probable source of the information. On completion of this textbook, students were given a test on inference skills.

Students practiced oral reading everyday during this practicum, and some improvement was noted. The students who did not read at the beginning of the practicum were now reading orally with help from the writer. The writer felt that the students' confidence had improved.

During the sixth week, the focus was on teaching comparison and contrast by using the cooperative learning strategy. The students worked on procedural prompting using lessons two and three from Spotlight on Reading: Critical Reading textbook. They recognized the writer's motive for writing, and explained the difference between fact and opinion.

The writer made sure that the students had ample practice in oral reading during

classroom exercises in the Critical and Sequential books. Progress report was made and the findings were summarized.

During the seventh week of the practicum, the teacher taught the method of Survey-Question and reading with a purpose. The teacher modeled how to discover the main idea in lessons three, four, five, and six using Spotlight on Reading: Critical Reading textbook. The student identified the writer's point of view and analyzed a primary source of material. They differentiated between facts and opinions, and reality and fantasy. After reading several paragraphs, the students explained the different points of view.

During the eighth week, the teacher modeled questions to ask during class activity. The students were taught the D.R.T.A. in lessons six, seven, and eight of the Spotlight on Reading: Critical Reading textbook. The students identified false generalizations and analyzed a selection to determine whether critical information was missing, in order to solve a problem.

During the ninth week, the teacher taught students how to scan for information in a passage. The teacher used the D.R.T.A. method in lessons nine, ten, and eleven using Spotlight on Reading: Critical Reading text. The students explained the difference between facts and educated guesses. They recognized whether a person was qualified to write on a subject and identified persuasive techniques in advertisements.

During the tenth week of implementation, the teacher demonstrated how to identify persuasive techniques used in the media. Teachers used the question and answer strategy while working with lessons eleven and twelve from Spotlight on Reading: Critical Reading text. The students identified the author's purpose and were able to determine

whether the purpose was to persuade, inform, or entertain. Students also determined whether critical information was missing. Upon completion of teaching students critical reading skills, a test was given to them to evaluate their progress.

During the eleventh week of the practicum, the teacher conducted a sequencing model. Using lessons one through five in Spotlight on Reading: Sequence text, the teacher demonstrated sequencing of events, order of events, and following directions. The students identified sequence of events, words that give clues about time, and order of events of a story.

During the twelfth week, the teacher modeled correct sequence in a story. The students used the D.R.T.A. method in lessons nine and eleven of Spotlight on Reading: Sequence text. The students interpreted a time line and wrote sequential directions. They took a post test which was compared to the pretest given at the beginning of the practicum. The writer summarized the data that was collected during the implementation.

Chapter V: Results

Results

The problem to be solved in this practicum was that sixth grade language arts students have difficulty answering inferential comprehension questions. The goal was to develop a program with a concentrated focus on reading comprehension strategies.

Three strategies were used to improve the students' comprehension skills. The first strategy was to teach students a higher order thinking and metacognitive skills by using SRA activities, Directed Reading/Thinking Activities, and Question and Answer Relationship strategies. The second strategy was to teach students to read. The third strategy was to use cooperative learning while working on assignments. The goal was for the sixth grade language arts students to respond to inferential comprehension questions successfully. The expectation was that students would use these skills to advance from concrete operational thinking to abstract operational thinking. Eighteen sixth grade students participated in this practicum process.

The following outcomes were projected for this practicum:

I. At least 15 of the 18 language arts students in this study will improve inferential reading comprehension skills by obtaining 70% accuracy on assignments. The instrument of evaluation was inferential reading skills tests. The data was stored in a cumulative record submitted by the teacher which contained student's grades on assignments. The teacher will set the standard of performance at 70% for all assignments.

The outcome was not met.

Six of the 18 students improved inferential reading comprehension skills by

obtaining 70% accuracy on assignments. The writer averaged students' scores and recorded this data in the grade book.

2. At least 15 of the 18 parents will participate in helping children with their reading assignments at home and return signed contracts to the school once a week for the 12 week practicum. The writer will send home a contract for parents which states the students' reading assignments for each week. A record of returned contracts will be kept by the teacher. The standard of performance will be that 15 of the 18 parents will help their child with reading assignments.

This outcome was not met.

The writer found that only five of the 18 parents helped their children with reading assignments at home. The writer kept a record of returned contracts each week. The writer recorded the total number of returned contracts to determine if the outcome was met.

3. From group one, at least eight of the 11 students will improve their inferential comprehension scores from failing grades of below 70 to 70 or above, as measured by Science Research Associated (SRA) comprehension test, after 12 weeks of instruction. The instrument of evaluation was a pre and post test administered at the beginning and at the end of the practicum. The standard of performance will be that eight of the 11 students will score 70 or above on comprehension.

This outcome was not met.

Scores from the post test indicated that none of the students obtained 70 or above on the inferential comprehension.

4. From group two, at least five of the seven students will improve their inferential comprehension scores from a grade of low 70 to 80 or above after 12 weeks of instruction. The instrument of evaluation was the SRA pretest and post test. The standard of performance will be that five of the seven students will score 80 or above on comprehension skills.

This outcome was not met.

In group two, four of the seven students scored 80 or above on the SRA post test.

Discussion

The first outcome showed that six of the 18 students scored 70% on inferential comprehension assignments which was recorded in the teacher's grade book during the practicum. This unsuccessful outcome was attributed to the poor reading skills of the students. The reading levels of the students ranged from third to fifth grade. The overall average of the students' reading levels was fourth grade and three months. All students were in the sixth grade, but they were reading one year and seven months below grade level. The students lacked the skills which would enable them to make inferences and understand assignments done in class.

The writer taught higher order thinking and metacognitive skills to her sixth grade students to improve comprehension skills. The skills included questioning, summarizing, clarifying, and predicting. Morrill (1995) used these strategies to help her students improve reading comprehension skills. The writer found that the students in this practicum needed to read fluently before they could improve reading comprehension skills.

The results of this writer's practicum and Morrill's study indicate that the students

with poor reading comprehension require more practice using strategies such as integrating questioning, clarifying, predicting, summarizing in reading classes to strengthen their abilities in comprehension.

The second outcome showed that five of the 18 students' parents helped with reading assignments at home. The writer attributed low responses to the fact that students came from single parent homes where the parents have full time jobs. Students remarked that their parents did not have time to listen to them read.

The writer felt that involving parents with their children's reading assignments would generate a habit for students to read at home and would help students improve their reading comprehension. All research concluded that student's academic performance improved when parents became involved with their child's education. Nathan (1996) and Epstein (1995) stated that a strategy to improve children's education was to create programs for parent involvement at home or at school.

The third outcome showed that none of group one students obtained a score of 70 or above on the SRA comprehension test. This failure was attributed to students' low reading levels when they began the practicum. One student was reading on a third grade reading level, three students were at third grade and five months, two were on fourth grade, three were on fourth grade and five months, and two were on fifth grade. The outcome indicated that seven of the 11 students had gained from one-half to two years in reading grade levels. Three of the 11 students lost ground, falling one-half to one and one-half years behind. One of the students dropped out of the practicum.

No student from group one was on sixth grade reading level when the practicum

began. Students' reading levels were from one-half to two years below sixth grade reading level. After the implementation of the practicum, three of the 11 students were at fifth grade and five months, three were on fifth grade, four were on third grade and five months, and one dropped out of the program. The students did improve their reading levels, but did not improve enough to reach their sixth grade reading level. The results of the practicum indicated that students' reading comprehension had improved but not to a sixth grade level.

The fourth outcome showed that four of the seven students from group two improved their inferential comprehension scores from a grade of low 70 to 80 or above after 12 weeks of instruction. The reading levels of the seven students at the beginning of the practicum were as follows: two were on fourth grade, one was on fourth grade and five months, three were on fifth grade, and one was on fifth grade and five months. Five of the seven students improved their reading comprehension level to sixth grade, and two of the seven improved their reading level to fifth grade and five months. The students improved their comprehension reading level from one-half to two years. The results indicate that students did make improvement based on their pre and post test scores on the SRA. However, the writer's projected improvement might have been too high for the students to obtain, based on the students' beginning scores in reading comprehension.

Although students did not meet the expected goals, they improved their comprehension skills, and were able to apply the skills when answering inferential comprehension questions. Three main strategies were implemented in the reading class to help the students successfully achieve the goal, but because the students started with such

low reading skills, they did not improve sufficiently to meet the expected goals.

Recommendations

There is one recommendation that could benefit others in similar academic settings. The recommendation is as follows:

1. Inform the parents how their involvement will benefit their children's educational success.

There are a number of recommendations that could increase the likelihood of success in the writer's 12 week practicum. They are as follows:

1. Provide parents an opportunity to meet and discuss with the writer the progress of their children during the practicum implementation.

2. Provide parents and students with an educational seminar on reading aloud and the benefits of this practice.

3. Extend the strategies for improving reading comprehension skills to the entire school, so that all students will improve in reading comprehension.

The rationale for these recommendations for this practicum is that all students will improve reading comprehension skills.

Dissemination

The writer plans to disseminate the practicum results among language arts colleagues in a departmental meeting. The writer will explain the strategies used in the practicum, and the teachers will receive information on what type of materials to use to improve students' reading comprehension.

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